Patterns of Pragmatic Verbal Abilities in Subjects with First Episode Psychosis and Matched Healthy Controls


Introduction: Pragmatic abilities play a crucial role in daily functioning and have been suggested to be impaired in schizophrenia. Nevertheless, patterns of such deficits at the onset of the illness still needs to be elucidated.

Objectives: To outline pragmatic abilities in the first episode of psychosis (FEP).

Aims: To evaluate pragmatic verbal performance and its relationship with pre-frontal abilities in FEP subjects recruited in a large randomized multi-center controlled study (GET UP).

Methods: 58 FEP (mean age±SD:34±9 years; 46% males) and 58 1:1 matched healthy controls (HC) were assessed on the metaphor and idiom comprehension subtask of the MEC Protocol and with WCST. A PAF Analysis with Promax rotation of open (=spontaneous explanations) and closed (=multiple choice) metaphors/idioms and WCST variables was conducted.

Results: A 3-factor latent structure emerged in both groups but partially different patterns emerged. As for FEP, open metaphor/idiom explanations loaded into Factor 1 (Self-generated inferences); Factor 2 (Feedback-generated inferences) was loaded by WCST perseverative errors and by closed metaphor explanations. Finally, closed metaphors/idioms loaded into Factor 3 (Inhibition). As for HC, Factor 1 was similarly loaded but explained less variance; Factor 2 was qualitatively different (Reasoning, self+feedback-generated inferences), being loaded by the WCST number of categories and by open metaphors/idioms. Factor 3 was loaded by closed metaphors.

Conclusions: Findings suggest a shared underlying cognitive construct in self-generating perceptual inferences both for verbal pragmatics and pre-frontal skills in HC and patients, while a failure to integrate different sources of perceptual evidence is found only in FEP.